

# Capabilities required for leading improvement: Challenges for researchers and developers



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## Abstract

The leadership of improvement is a challenging task, requiring capability in 1) using relevant knowledge to 2) solve complex educational problems while 3) building relationships of trust with those involved.

In this keynote paper, Professor Viviane Robinson describes what she has learnt from her leadership research and development program about each of these three leadership capabilities.

In addressing the first of these leadership capabilities, she describes key findings about how leaders' relevant knowledge intersects with their ability to build trust and solve the problems that stand in the way of their improvement goals.

Her discussion of the second capability draws on empirical research about how educational leaders typically solve complex on-the-job problems. She discusses how leaders communicate about perceived problems; how they analyse and attempt to solve them; and the consequences of their typical strategies for single- and double-loop learning and for educational improvement.

In discussing the third capability, that of building relational trust, Viviane presents key findings about the interpersonal skills leaders employ in their on-the-job problem-solving conversations and the dilemma they frequently experience between progressing the problem and maintaining trust.

She then discusses the types of professional learning and development that are more effective or less effective in building leaders' capacity in these three critical capabilities.

In the final part of her paper, Viviane reflects on the considerable methodological and design challenges that are involved in conducting research on leadership capabilities that is simultaneously highly rigorous and highly relevant to leadership practice.

Three capabilities are central to the leadership of improvement. It requires capability in 1) using relevant knowledge from research and experience to 2) solve the complex educational problems that stand in the way of achieving improvement goals while 3) building relationships of trust with those involved. I settled on these three capabilities because there is either direct or indirect evidence of their links to student outcomes (Robinson, 2010, 2011). I like having just three broad capabilities because leadership work is complex and holistic, and if we create long lists of discrete leadership capabilities, we misrepresent its highly integrated nature (Louden & Wildy, 1999).

Take the example of a secondary school leader who knows from the research evidence that streaming is a major contributor to achievement disparities, because students in the lower ability streams get few opportunities to learn challenging material (Schmidt, Burroughs, Zoido, & Houang, 2015). This leader wants to use this knowledge to make better quality decisions about how to group students in his school so that there are more equitable opportunities to learn.

But the leader cannot act on this knowledge without considerable skill in the second capability—being able to solve complex problems. In order to implement the decision to reduce streaming and move to more

mixed ability grouping, he must address such issues as teacher attitudes towards and skill in mixed ability teaching; the preference of some parents for streaming; and the time it will take to reorganise timetables, assessments and teaching plans. Resolving these multiple issues requires capability in complex problem-solving.

Leaders cannot solve such problems on their own. They need to build trust with teachers who may be sceptical; who have different beliefs about what works in their classrooms; and who may be tired of change. In education, problem-solving is a largely social process, and it requires leaders at all levels to have high ability in the third capability, that of building relational trust. For the leader in this example, this would involve listening to teachers' objections to more mixed ability teaching; creating a safe environment in which teachers can talk about their lack of confidence and skill in mixed ability teaching; and leading the change process in a way that builds confidence in the leader's competence.

In summary, student-centred leaders use their research and professional knowledge to solve complex problems of teaching and learning while building trust with those involved. Student-centred leadership requires the skilful integration of these three capabilities.

## First capability: Using knowledge

This capability is about making educational decisions that are strongly informed by quality research or practice-based evidence. For example, decisions about how to group learners are informed by research on ability grouping; school homework practices are informed by the considerable research on the types of homework that help or hinder learners; and decisions on how to teach comprehension are informed by research on the effects of particular teaching strategies.

I think we greatly underestimate the knowledge required to be successful educators. This is partly because the goalposts for what counts as success have shifted so much. Today, successful schools and systems are those in which teachers are deeply knowledgeable about how to accelerate the growth of learners who lag behind age-related benchmarks.

In many cases, such pedagogical knowledge is available in the system—there is good research evidence about the specific teaching strategies that are associated with accelerated progress in, for example, mathematical reasoning and the writing of well-constructed paragraphs. Leaders have a considerable responsibility to make such knowledge available to their teachers and to model, expect and enable continued professional learning that is focused on meeting the priority needs of learners.

I call this first capability ‘using knowledge’, rather than ‘having knowledge’, because it involves more than acquiring tertiary qualifications. While such study provides a foundation of knowledge, this capability requires leaders to use that knowledge to inform their educational decision-making.

There is very little research that directly investigates how different levels of this capability affect leadership performance and student outcomes. The strong tradition of research on teacher content and pedagogical content knowledge has no parallel in leadership research, with the exception of a study on how different levels of expertise in maths and maths pedagogy shaped principals’ leadership of a district-wide maths reform (Nelson & Sassi, 2005).

## Second capability: Solving complex problems

Effective leaders are those who can solve the problems that prevent the achievement of team or organisational goals (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000). For the last few years, I have led a research and development program that has revealed some very interesting patterns in the way New Zealand and Australian school leaders go about problem-solving. In one of our studies (Sinnema, Le Fevre,

Robinson, & Pope, 2013), we asked educational leaders to complete a questionnaire about a concern they had regarding the behaviour or performance of someone in their area of responsibility. They described the duration of their perceived problem, the effectiveness of their prior attempts to resolve it, and their own possible contribution to the situation. In 22 per cent of cases, the problems these leaders nominated had persisted for between one and two years, and in 12 per cent of cases, they had persisted for more than two years. On average, educational leaders rated their prior attempts as minimally effective and the conversations they had as somewhat difficult.

For most leaders, there was a considerable difference between how they described their concern in their questionnaire and how they communicated it to the person involved. In all cases where there was a difference, the concern was described as much more serious, certain and problematic in the questionnaire than in discussions with the person involved. Rather than the clear and open-minded statement of their concerns required for what I call ‘constructive problem talk’, leaders tended to communicate their concerns indirectly through loaded questions or vague statements.

Our second major finding about how leaders solve problems was that they tend to move very rapidly from identifying a problem to offering or soliciting strategies about how to resolve it. They skip the phase of causal inquiry, including rigorous inquiry into possible school-based causes of the problem (Robinson, Meyer, Sinnema, & Le Fevre, 2016). This quick-fix approach can work if the problem is a new and simple one, but most educational problems are not of this type. Experienced teachers and leaders have usually tried multiple quick fixes that turn out to be neither quick nor a fix. Repeated cycles of quick fixes waste everyone’s time; lead to cynicism and burnout; and, worse still, leave the students no better off. The quick-fix pattern manifests in both the micro context of problem-solving conversations and the macro context of regional and national school improvement policy and practice (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & Le Mahieu, 2015).

The third major finding from our research program on problem-solving was about how leaders check the validity of their beliefs about the nature, causes of and solutions to the problems they do discuss. Of the various validation strategies that can be employed in a conversation, seeking agreement is the most common (Robinson et al., 2016). In our analysis of dozens of transcripts, it was rare to find leaders who were able to test their beliefs by treating difference as an opportunity for disconfirmation or by discussing the alignment between their proposed solution strategies and the likely cause of the problem. The consequence, in a considerable proportion of our cases, was agreement on a solution that was misaligned with the likely problem cause.

Our research methodology has enabled us to study how leaders think as well as how they talk in problem-solving conversations (Mumford, Watts, & Partlow, 2015). We have learnt from analysis of the alignment between leaders' thoughts and their speech that the absence of causal talk is not due to the absence of causal ideas. On the contrary, leaders have numerous beliefs about how the teaching or relational skills of the person to whom they are speaking may have contributed to the problem under discussion. It is leaders' reluctance to disclose and test these ideas that is largely responsible for the paucity of causal talk. Also responsible is the belief of many leaders that it is their job to provide support, and that doing so requires them to agree as quickly as possible on some strategies for fixing the problem.

## Third capability: Building relational trust

Leadership is not just about building trust. Nor is it only about getting the work done. It is about doing both of those things simultaneously, and it is this integration that is captured in this third capability. Experienced school leaders know how to build relationships; what they find far more difficult is building and maintaining relationships of trust while addressing the difficult issues that are central to leading improvement. One of the most compelling bodies of evidence on trust is derived from the research program of Bryk and Schneider (2002). Their empirically based model of trust shows that teachers' trust of their leaders is a function of the degree to which their daily interactions with those leaders demonstrate personal regard, interpersonal respect, competence and personal integrity. From extensive longitudinal quantitative and qualitative research, Bryk and Schneider demonstrated a causal relationship between the degree of trust among members of a school community and the degree of improvement in student outcomes.

If we are to help leaders develop this third capability, we need research and development programs that design and evaluate interventions that help leaders to solve problems in ways that build trust. In my own program, I have drawn strongly on the work of Argyris and Schön (1974; 1996), for it is a rare example of a research program that offers a strong normative theory of leadership effectiveness combined with behavioural evidence of what that normative theory looks like in practice.

Our research program has focused in particular on those conversations that leaders have reported as raising the possibility of threat or embarrassment — negative emotions that leaders believe could damage rather than build trust. Such conversations typically focus on aspects of another's performance or

behaviour; perceived disagreements; or giving and receiving negative feedback. Our research on this third capability has shown that many leaders experience a dilemma between being honest about such issues and maintaining trust. They resolve their dilemma either by being brutally frank or, more commonly, by being selective and indirect about what they say. Rather than being genuine, a high proportion of leaders' questions in such conversations are either leading or loaded (Le Fevre, Robinson, & Sinnema, 2015). Our interventions have become increasingly focused on the thoughts that leaders take into such conversations rather than just on their actual speech, for it is their framing of the problem that creates their dilemma between being brutally frank or vague and dissembling (Robinson, 2016). The way out of the dilemma is not to seek a midpoint between speaking frankly and speaking vaguely, but to drop the prejudgements that reduce trust and limit collaborative problem-solving whether or not they are disclosed.

To date, our research program has reported one statewide intervention study with Australian system leaders in which independent ratings by both the leaders themselves and their conversation partners showed that after three days of training, leaders had improved their skills, built greater trust and made progress on the problems facing them (Robinson, Sinnema, & Le Fevre, 2014). We are now working on a pilot study that tests whether our leadership interventions improve team leaders' conversations with their teachers in ways that change teaching practice and lift the achievement of target students in reading. We are striving, in other words, to test whether our interventions with leaders have demonstrable impacts on the students for whom those team leaders are responsible.

## Research challenges

There are substantial challenges involved in conducting research on these three leadership capabilities in ways that contribute to rigorous research and the improvement of practice. First, a normative theory is required so that we can move beyond describing what leaders do and don't do to intervening in ways that help them achieve the central purpose of educational leadership—building trust while addressing important educational problems in ways that benefit students.

Second, that normative theory needs to be specified at a level of detail that enables those who engage with it to discriminate between leadership thoughts and words that are consistent and those that are inconsistent with the values that comprise the normative theory.

Third, we need more studies that focus on the relationship between leadership cognition and behaviour (Mumford et al., 2015). We have found that behavioural measures are not always reliable indicators of the capability we are studying. The trust and problem-

solving capabilities require leaders to be able to reconsider their views, and such reconsideration is 'not a matter of mere perfunctory listening to contrary opinions but a genuine readiness to revise or even abandon one's views in light of new objections or counter evidence' (Spiegel, 2012, p. 28). Behavioural measures of listening or inquiry are not always reliable indicators of genuine readiness or of the interpersonal respect that is a key determinant of trust. Cognitive measures alert us to such normative mismatches and provide a window into the forms of reasoning that drive these behaviours. Together, cognitive and behavioural measures can provide descriptions and explanations of leaders' social problem-solving as well as insights into how it may be improved.

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